

Sermon for the 12th Sunday after Pentecost, 2008
 Trinity Church
 Matthew 14:13-21

ON GIVING GOD A CHANCE

Some of us will remember Father Mark McDonald, now Bishop McDonald. Father Mark was mentor to the Trinity congregation during the sabbatical leave of our priest in 1997. Soon after he became the Bishop of Alaska, he preached a sermon at Pine Point. It was one of the best sermons I have ever heard. As I remember it -- and I may not get all of the details exactly right -- but, as it sticks in my memory, he told about how he had just been ordained a priest and was traveling to his first charge I think somewhere down in the southwestern United States. If you have driven through that territory or flown over it on the way to Phoenix or Las Vegas -- or if you have read any of Tony Hillerman's novels about the Navaho country, you can picture it in your mind -- dusty roads winding far out through the arroyos and canyons to remote houses and settlements.

It was along one of those dusty roads that young Father Mark drove in an old pick-up with his belongings. The pick-up broke down and there he was, Mark McDonald, priest, far from any of the support systems that travelers rely on. I don't know how he solved his problem. I don't remember if he said. What I do remember, and remember clearly, was him saying, "There I was. There was only Jesus and me -- just Jesus and me."

Just Jesus and me --and, clearly, that was enough; and that is exactly where the Gospel takes us this morning. It's about how we inventory our resources -- how we take stock of what it is that we need to sustain our lives, where we find the strength to meet our responsibilities, and what will offer real nourishment for our souls. And at the bottom line it describes the quality of faith it will take to build Christ's Church and accomplish its mission.

The lesson tells us a lot about Jesus. "Jesus withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself." That one line, in its context, says a lot about Jesus' character. He had gone away to a distant place to be alone for awhile. He needed to do that because he was grieving. He had just learned that John the Baptist, the person he was closer to than any other human being, his cousin, his friend, his spiritual companion, had died and died horribly at the hands of a depraved king. Jesus needed to be alone. That he could be plunged into grief, that he could feel that profound sense of loss is one more index of his thorough humanity, his incarnation, his accepting the human condition of those whom he came to save. It was that acceptance that authenticated his ministry and licensed him to exercise in and through it the power of the Eternal God.

Jesus needed to be alone. He wanted to discard his public identity for just a little while -- and they wouldn't let him. People followed him, many people, even to that remote place. Even his own companions wouldn't leave him alone. The great, compassionate heart of that Savior, responded. He set aside his own spiritual exhaustion and digging deep into his own spiritual and emotional resources, he was, as always, the Master, the Teacher, the Healer.

The story is so familiar that we hardly need to retell it. It was a familiar story almost from the beginning. Each of the four gospels tells it with variation only in the details. The place was remote, the day was late, and the inner circle of Jesus' followers urged him to dismiss the people to find food for themselves. Jesus' amazing, puzzling, frustrating response was, "That's not necessary. You feed them!" What could Jesus' closest followers, those who would inherit his message and mission, make of that? As they mumbled and muttered amongst themselves, how

might they have processed all of what they had learned through their companionship with Jesus? And what can we make of it, we who are the inheritors of the mission and the message? Maybe the full significance only dawned later. In any event, some important truths emerge.

The first is that Jesus trusts his followers. “You feed them.” I can see the light dawning on Peter not very long after as Jesus said to him, “If you love me, feed my sheep.” Jesus entrusted his followers with his mission; and in entrusting them, he empowered them. They were ordinary men, and there is reason to believe that in the mix there were women as well. Jesus entrusted them, knowing that they would be adequate for the task.

Jesus trusted his followers just as they relied on him. In the same way, Christ trusts his church to the same extent that the church is willing to trust Christ. “You feed them.”

The second lesson had to do with resources. That’s usually the main issue, isn’t it. It calls for an inventory. What resources, material and otherwise, do we have to bring to bear on the problem. It’s a very practical consideration. There are two ways to approach that accounting; and here is where a comparison is useful and even exciting. As Matthew tells the story, the disciples, given the challenge, say, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” Get that. We have nothing here. Mission impossible!

Move over to John’s gospel where he tells the same story, but with a different twist. With the disciples in the same quandary, Andrew, simple Andrew, says, “There is a lad here with five loaves and two fish, but what are they among so many.” Yes. What are they? What can we do with them? We have something, as small as it may be; but it is not nothing. It is a beginning.

The third lesson is also about resources, and here we are back with Mark McDonald on his lonely road. “There was only Jesus and me.” On the Galilee seashore, there were more than five thousand people, five loaves and two fish -- and Jesus. And Jesus made all the difference. Jesus still makes all the difference.

How often in the meetings of our Sessions and our vestries, our conventions and presbyteries and all those solemn assemblies does the mission of the church run aground on the perception that, in a tough economy, all we have is five loaves and two fish, with Jesus not admitted to the equation-- with God not admitted to the equation -- always on the grounds of practicality?

At the end of that long day, a miracle took place. Five thousand men were fed and with left-overs. it was a miracle, a mystery, and we can take it at face value; but there is another possibility, another kind of miracle, no less mysterious. Nowhere in all of the gospel telling of the story of the loaves and fishes does it actually say that Jesus multiplied the actual material food. They only say that he took what was available and blessed it. There is every possibility that there was more food stashed away in bags and baskets than people admitted to having. And that the real miracle was the opening of hearts to an overflowing generosity and sharing. That, too, is a miracle. That, too, is a work of Christ.

Fear, concern for the future, the possibility of unforeseen eventualities, the responsibilities for people and things entrusted to us -- not to mention the conveniences of life that we have come to imagine as necessities (or no more than we deserve!) -- all of these pre-occupations dry up the springs of generosity. The gospel story suggests a vastly larger possibility. It suggests a new reckoning of what we really possess, a re-examination of our priorities, and a reassessment of how much we can actually afford to share. Most of all, it suggests an accounting that does not

leave out the working power of God in the purposes of our own lives. Otherwise we become practicing agnostics, however fervent our worship. It's a question of giving God a chance to work. God provides seeds for our gardens, but they will provide neither food nor flower unless we plant and tend them.

A miracle happened! To imagine the scene is a delight. There were families there. It is embarrassing in our own age to read that the five thousand added women and children to the figure as an afterthought. But the point is made: it was clearly a family affair! At the end of the long day the event turned into a picnic, a festival of thanksgiving, a eucharist blessed by the presence of Jesus Christ himself. And in that feast of sharing and giving thanks there dawns the possibility that every gathering of God's people -- every church potluck, every family table -- will share in the eucharistic blessing, and that through us, in the name of Christ, all the world will be nourished and blessed.

Now unto him who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think; to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, now and forever. Amen.